



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Vale District Office
100 Oregon Street
Vale, Oregon 97918-9630
<http://www.or.blm.gov/Vale/>

IN REPLY REFER TO:
4100
OR-030-00-007

June 20, 2000

Dear Reader:

An Environmental Assessment (EA) Document has been prepared by the Vale District, Bureau of Land Management for the issuance of temporary nonrenewable grazing use (TNR) in the East Cow Creek allotment. The EA analyzes the impacts of TNR for the next 7-8 years until the Cow Creek Geographic Management Area (GMA) assessment/evaluation is completed in 2008. Once the Cow Creek GMA evaluation is completed a decision regarding the conversion of the TNR to permanent will be made. This TNR has been used in the East Cow Creek allotment for the last 24 years and is in conformance with Land Use Plan (LUP) utilization limits, wildlife habitat values, and other LUP objectives.

The end of the 15-day public comment period on the EA in which you will have an opportunity to comment on this proposal and the adequacy of the Environmental Assessment. is July 5, 2000. If you wish to remain on the mailing list concerning this project and are interested in receiving a copy of the EA document or have any questions concerning this project, please contact Tom Miles at (541) 473-3144.

Sincerely,

Jerry L. Taylor
Jordan Field Office Manager

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
OR-030-00-007

BLM OFFICE: Vale

PROPOSED ACTION: Temporary Nonrenewable Grazing Application

LOCATION OF PROPOSED ACTION: East Cow Creek Allotment (10903)

APPLICANT: Rich Bennett, Jim Elordi, Jeff Anderson Estate, Cow Lakes Grazing Assoc., Tim Freeman, Dave Terry, Terry Warn, and Mat Bowen.

CONFORMANCE WITH APPLICABLE LAND USE PLAN

This proposed action is subject to the following land use plans:

Name of Plans: Southern Malheur MFP (1983)

Southern Rangeland Program Summary (RPS) (1984)

East Cow Creek Allotment Management Plan (AMP) (1972)

The plans have been reviewed to determine if the proposed action conforms with the land use plan terms and conditions as required by 43 CFR 1610.5. Within the Southern Malheur RPS and East Cow Creek AMP, the primary management objective for the allotment is to maintain the current condition of the crested wheatgrass seedings and native range pastures. East Cow Creek allotment is classified as an “M” allotment.

REMARKS

This project is in conformance with the MFP and RPS and the objectives of maintaining vegetative and soil conditions to benefit watershed, wildlife and livestock.

NEED FOR PROPOSED ACTION

Grazing applications are received annually from Rich Bennett, Jim Elordi, Jeff Anderson Estate, Cow Lakes Grazing Assoc., Tim Freeman, Dave Terry, Terry Warn, and Mat Bowen, requesting temporary nonrenewable (TNR) grazing use for 40 AUMs, 97 AUMs, 38 AUMs, 110 AUMs, 300 AUMs, 58 AUMs, 642 AUMs and 428 AUMs, respectively.

The TNR AUMs applied for are suspended AUMs within the total grazing preference of the permits for the permittees. More importantly, these AUMs have been temporarily authorized on an annual basis since 1972. In addition, the East Cow Creek AMP was revised in 1974 to reflect the restoration of the suspended nonuse AUMs on a “temporary basis”, and the normal operating plan specified in the AMP includes the suspended nonuse AUMs for each permittee. For the past 24 years, these AUMs have been used on an annual basis but were never included as active preference. The Southern Malheur Grazing Management Program Environmental Impact Statement (1983-page 68) analyzed the use of these suspended AUMs along with the active preference for the allotment under the preferred alternative.

With the issuance of the new grazing regulations in 1995, as outlined in 43 CFR 4130.6-2, TNR permits would be authorized on an annual basis when forage is temporarily available, provided this use is consistent with multiple-use objectives and does not interfere with existing livestock operations on public

land. The annual issuance of this TNR following EAs and public notification on a yearly basis takes up too much of the Jordan Resource Area's staff time when the EA analysis could be done once to cover TNR issuance over multi-years. During this time frame studies (utilization, actual use) would continue to provide information for the Cow Creek Geographic Management Area (GMA) evaluation in 2008 at which time a decision would be made on whether to make the AUMs permanent.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action

The proposed action would be to authorize temporary nonrenewable grazing use annually until the Cow Creek (GMA) planning process is completed in 2007-2008 and a decision is made on whether to make the AUMs permanent active preference. All TNR will be consistent with Land Use Plan (LUP) utilization standards of a maximum of 50% utilization in native pastures (40% in the Barlow pasture) and 60% in seeded pastures. The TNR will be authorized as follows:

Permittee	Season of Use – Total Days	Total AUMs (Suspended AUMs)	Pastures
Rich Bennett	07/05 - 07/29 (25 days)	40 AUMs	Bennett N&S
Jim Elordi	05/21 - 06/07 (17 days)	97 AUMs	JV N&S
Jeff Anderson Estate, Inc.	05/21 - 06/07 (17 days)	38 AUMs	JV N&S
Cow Lakes Grazing Assoc.	09/08 - 10/17 (40 days)	110 AUMs	Lava Boulder East
Tim Freeman	08/03 - 09/29 (58 days)	300 AUMs	Lava Boulder East
Dave Terry	08/25 - 09/28 (35 days)	58 AUMs	Lava Boulder West
Terry Warn	08/23 - 09/26 (35 days)	642 AUMs	Big Ridge N Big Ridge S Barlow Hooker Creek N Hooker Creek S
Mat Bowen	09/05 - 10/12 (37 days)	428 AUMs	Cowgill Little Sand N Little Sand E Little Sand S Downey Cyn

The grazing authorization would continue during the late spring and early summer, following the pasture for each area of use, which would be within the season of use for this allotment, as determined by the Southern Malheur MFP (1983)

B. Alternative 1- No Action

This alternative would be denial of the TNR application which would result in no grazing beyond the authorized Active Preference. The additional 1713 AUMs of suspended use would not be used.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The allotment is in the 10 to 12 inch precipitation zone and consists of gently sloping and rolling lava plateau uplands underlain by recent basaltic flows. Three dominant soil types exist in the area: 1) shallow, clayey, very stony and well drained, 2) shallow, clayey, well drained soils but are less stony and generally have thicker silty surface layers, and 3) very shallow, very stony, rocky well drained, gravelly loam soils located on slightly steeper slopes.

According to Aldrich and Durall (1955) sage grouse in this geographic area are identified as the eastern subspecies (Centrocercus urophasianus urophasianus). Although this taxonomic determination is about to be changed based on genetic research throughout the West, sage grouse within the analysis area are not former federal candidates and they have no special status under current OR/WA special status species policy. They are nevertheless an important indicator species of rangeland health and have high priority in assessing habitat quality.

A. The Bennett North Pasture

This pasture comprises 932 acres of an excellent stand of native range that is in mid seral condition. It is a complex of low sage and big sagebrush communities with a very good composition and diversity of grasses and forbs. It is grazed in rotation with the Bennett South pasture which is also in mid seral condition. The management objective for this pasture is to maintain the native range and mid seral condition.

The pasture is managed under a deferred grazing system to meet the physiological requirements of the key forage plants and promote rangeland health. The average total actual utilization for the past 15 years, which included use of the suspended AUMs, was 26%.

The pasture provides some Wyoming sagebrush habitat that is probably used for nesting sage grouse (about one third of the pasture). Most of the pasture is a low sagebrush type which is not typically used for nesting because of limited hiding cover from predators and other disturbances. There are no leks identified within the allotment. However, 10 leks have been located to the west within a 10 mile radius of this pasture.

Riparian habitat has been recently located within the Bennett North pasture. The Southern Malheur MFP previously listed no riparian areas. Each of the two riparian areas are approximately ½ mile long. One is located in the very northeast end and the other is in the south end of the pasture. Riparian and meadow habitats are dominated by perennial grasses, rushes and other herbaceous species. Although there are pockets of white top and raw soils associated with some of the riparian habitat, these conditions are not the dominant aspect of the system. Riparian habitat in the pasture would not be expected to support much of a woody component because it sets within a small sub-watershed that is generally free from scouring events characteristics in woody riparian systems.

Wildlife habitat conditions exceed minimum Rangeland Health standards under current grazing within the Bennett North pasture. Grazing use has been generally light and limited in scope. The pasture supports pronghorn and mule deer use. The low sagebrush community is considered to be good quality mid-elevation pronghorn spring-summer-fall range. Big sagebrush and bitterbrush communities provide mature shrub structure and an understory of forbs typically sought by mule deer.

Shrub and herbaceous cover characteristics in the pasture are favorable to other sagebrush obligates identified in Wildlife in Managed Rangelands (Thomas et. al. 1984). Furthermore, there are no herbaceous or shrub cover fragmentation problems within this pasture.

B. The Bennett South Pasture

The Bennett South pasture consists of 431 acres and is an excellent stand of native range that is in mid seral condition. It is a complex of low sagebrush and big sagebrush communities with a very good composition and diversity of grasses and forbs. It is grazed in rotation with the Bennett North pasture which is also in mid seral condition. The management objective of the pasture is to maintain the native range in mid seral condition.

The pasture is managed under a deferred grazing system to meet the physiological requirements of the key forage plants and promote rangeland health. The average total actual utilization in the pasture for the past 15 years, which included use of the suspended AUMs, was 26%.

The Bennett South pasture provides some Wyoming sagebrush habitat that is probably used for nesting sage grouse (about one third of the pasture). Most of the pasture is a low sagebrush type which is not typically used for nesting because of limited hiding cover from predators and other disturbances. There are no leks identified within the allotment. However, 10 leks have been located to the west within a 10 mile radius of this pasture.

Riparian habitat is supported within the Bennett South pasture. Riparian and meadow habitats are dominated by perennial grasses, rushes and other herbaceous species. Riparian habitat in the pasture would not be expected to support much of a woody component because it sits within a small sub-watershed that is generally free from scouring events characteristics in woody riparian systems.

Wildlife habitat conditions exceed minimum Rangeland Health standards under current grazing within the Bennett South pasture. Grazing use has been generally light and limited in scope. The Bennett South pasture supports pronghorn and mule deer use. The low sagebrush community is considered to be good quality mid-elevation pronghorn spring-summer-fall range. Big sagebrush and bitterbrush communities provide mature shrub structure and an understory of forbs typically sought by mule deer.

Shrub and herbaceous cover characteristics in the Bennett South pasture are favorable to other sagebrush obligates identified in Wildlife in Managed Rangelands (Thomas et. al. 1984). Furthermore, there are no herbaceous or shrub cover fragmentation problems within this pasture.

C. The Jordan Valley (JV) Seeding North Pasture

The JV Seeding North pasture consists of 1,348 acres and 50% of the pasture consists of a homogenous stand of crested wheatgrass that is in excellent condition. The management objective is to maintain the crested wheatgrass seeding in excellent condition.

The other 50% of the seeding is comprised of a topographically complex rangeland which supports Wyoming sagebrush and bitterbrush. There is good quality moderate and heavy shrub structure suitable for sagebrush obligate species throughout this portion of the pasture. Bitterbrush stands are healthy and show evidence of reproduction in most areas. Growth forms show limited impacts from livestock grazing which has been authorized in the past.

The pasture is managed under a deferred grazing system to meet the physiological requirements of the key forage plants and promote rangeland health. The average total actual utilization for the past 24 years, which included use of the suspended AUMs, was 42%.

D. The Jordan Valley (JV) Seeding South Pasture

The JV Seeding South pasture consists of 1,293 acres and 80% of the pasture consists of a homogenous stand of crested wheatgrass that is in excellent condition. The management objective is to maintain the crested wheatgrass seeding in excellent condition.

The other 20% of the seeding is comprised of a topographically complex rangeland which supports Wyoming sagebrush and bitterbrush. There is good quality moderate and heavy shrub structure suitable for sagebrush obligate species throughout this portion of the pasture. Bitterbrush stands are healthy and show evidence of reproduction in most areas. Growth forms show limited impacts from livestock grazing which has been authorized in the past.

The pasture is managed under a deferred grazing system to meet the physiological requirements of the key forage plants and promote rangeland health. The average total actual utilization for the past 24 years, which included use of the suspended AUMs, was 41%.

E. The Lava and Cowgill Pastures

The Lava and Cowgill pastures consist of 11,848 and 4,629 acres, respectively. The Cowgill pasture is in mid seral condition and the Lava pasture is in late seral condition. Both pastures are a complex of low sagebrush and big sagebrush communities with a very good composition and diversity of native grasses, forbs and shrubs. The management objective of the pastures is to maintain the native range in mid to late seral condition.

The pastures are managed under a deferred grazing system to meet the physiological requirements of the key forage plants and promote rangeland health. The Cowgill pasture is grazed late (8/1 - 9/30).

The average total actual utilization for the past 24 years, which included use of the suspended AUMs, was 35% in the Lava pasture and 38% in the Cowgill pasture.

The pastures provide some Wyoming sagebrush habitat that is probably used for nesting sage grouse. Most of the pastures are a low sagebrush type which is not typically used for nesting because of limited hiding cover from predators and other disturbances. There are no leks identified within the allotment. However, 10 leks have been located to the west within a 10 mile radius of this pasture.

No known riparian habitat is supported within the pastures.

Wildlife habitat conditions exceed minimum Rangeland Health standards under current grazing within the pastures. The pasture supports pronghorn and mule deer use. The low sagebrush community is considered to be good quality mid-elevation pronghorn spring-summer-fall range.

Shrub and herbaceous cover characteristics in the pastures are favorable to other sagebrush obligates identified in Wildlife in Managed Rangelands (Thomas et. al. 1984). Furthermore, there are no herbaceous or shrub cover fragmentation problems within these pastures.

F. The Big Ridge North and Big Ridge South Seedings

The Big Ridge South pasture consists of 1,673 acres and the Big Ridge Seeding North pasture consists of 1,736 acres. Both pastures consist of a homogenous stand of crested wheatgrass that is in excellent condition intermixed with low sagebrush plant communities. The management objective is to maintain the crested wheatgrass seeding in excellent condition.

These pastures are managed under a deferred grazing system to meet the physiological requirements of the key forage plants and promote rangeland health. The average total actual utilization for the past 24 years, which included use of the suspended AUMs, was 47% in the Big Ridge North pasture and 50% in the Big Ridge South pasture.

G. The Hooker Creek North and Hooker Creek South Seedings

The Hooker Creek North pasture consists of 707 acres and the Hooker Creek South pasture consists of 1,327 acres. Both pastures consist of a homogenous stand of crested wheatgrass that is in excellent condition intermixed with low sagebrush plant communities. The management objective is to maintain the crested wheatgrass seeding in excellent condition.

These pastures are managed under a deferred grazing system to meet the physiological requirements of the key forage plants and promote rangeland health. The average total actual utilization for the past 24 years, which included use of the suspended AUMs, was 46% in the Hooker Creek North pasture and 43% in the Hooker Creek South pasture.

H. Little Sandy North, Little Sandy East, and Little Sandy South seedings

The Little Sandy North, Little Sandy East, and Little Sandy South pasture consists of 1,598 acres, 1,158 acres, and 997 acres respectively. All three pastures consist of a homogenous stand of crested wheatgrass that is in excellent condition intermixed with low sagebrush plant communities. The management objective is to maintain the crested wheatgrass seeding in excellent condition

These pastures are managed under a deferred grazing system to meet the physiological requirements of the key forage plants and promote rangeland health. The average total actual utilization for the past 24 years, which included use of the suspended AUMs, was LS North-56%, LS East-50%, and LS South-41%.

I. The Barlow and Boulder Pastures

The Barlow and Boulder pastures consists of 5,256 and 8,024 acres, respectively. The Barlow pasture is in mid seral condition and the Boulder pasture is in late seral condition. Both pastures are a complex of low sagebrush and big sagebrush communities with a very good composition and diversity of native grasses, forbs and shrubs. The management objective of the pastures is to maintain the native range in mid to late seral condition.

The pastures are managed under a deferred grazing system to meet the physiological requirements of the key forage plants and promote rangeland health. The average total actual utilization for the past 24 years, which included use of the suspended AUMs, was 38% in the Barlow pasture and 42% in the Boulder pasture.

The pastures provide some Wyoming sagebrush habitat that is probably used for nesting sage grouse. Most of the pastures are a low sagebrush type which is not typically used for nesting because of limited hiding cover from predators and other disturbances. There are no leks identified within the allotment. However, 10 leks have been located to the west within a 10 mile radius of this pasture.

Wildlife habitat conditions exceed minimum Rangeland Health standards under current grazing within the pastures. The pasture supports pronghorn and mule deer use. The low sagebrush community is considered to be good quality mid-elevation pronghorn spring-summer-fall range.

Shrub and herbaceous cover characteristics in the pastures are favorable to other sagebrush obligates identified in Wildlife in Managed Rangelands (Thomas et. al. 1984). Furthermore, there are no herbaceous or shrub cover fragmentation problems within these pastures.

J. The Downey Canyon Seeding

The Downey Canyon pasture is 1,251 acres consisting of a homogenous stand of crested wheatgrass that is in excellent condition intermixed with low sagebrush plant communities. The management objective is to maintain the crested wheatgrass seeding in excellent condition.

These pastures are managed under a deferred grazing system to meet the physiological requirements of the key forage plants and promote rangeland health. The average total actual utilization for the past 24 years, which included use of the suspended AUMs, was 40% in the pasture.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS (Proposed Action)

Mandatory Elements

The following mandatory elements are either not present or would not be affected by the proposed action or alternative:

AFFECTED CRITICAL ELEMENTS	YES	NO
Air Quality		X
ACECs		X
Cultural Resources		X
Farmlands, Prime/Unique		X
Floodplains		X
Nat. Amer. Rel. Concerns		X
T&E Species		X
Wastes, Hazardous/Solid		X
Water Quality		X
Wetlands/Riparian Zones	X	
Wild & Scenic Rivers		X
Wilderness (WSA)		X
Wildlife	X	

Short-term environmental impacts would include the partial removal of annual above ground biomass from utilized crested wheatgrass plants and native plants in the pastures. Plant vigor should be maintained because the expected annual utilization level would not be exceeded.

Within areas influenced by livestock grazing, bitterbrush communities showed very limited effects from browsing. Young and seedling bitterbrush plants were commonly observed with livestock use areas, indicating that reproduction is ongoing under the current grazing system.

Riparian habitat should not be adversely impacted with the authorization of this additional livestock use. The alternating grazing cycle and potential for regrowth of herbaceous cover is consistent with the definition of a properly functioning watershed. The lack of weed dominance and limited exposed soil surface indicated grazing has been moderately favorable for riparian management requirements.

For the past 15 years these pastures have been managed under a deferred system of livestock use to ensure that the proper intensity, timing and duration of defoliation on crested wheatgrass and native range are followed. Through pasture rotation, subsequent grazing the following year will provide for periodic deferment to meet the physiological requirements of the key forage plants. Enough residual vegetation will be left to meet soil and watershed objectives and provide forage and cover for wildlife.

Following is a chart that reflects the 24 year Utilization Average by permit holder and pasture.

Permittee	Pasture	Suspended AUMs (Authorized under TNR)	Utilization Maximum	24 year Utilization Average
Rich Bennett	Bennett N	40 AUMs	50	26*
	Bennett S		50	26*
Jim Elordi	JV N	97 AUMs	60	42
	JV S		60	41
Jeff Anderson Estate, Inc	JV N	38 AUMs	60	42
	JV S		60	41
Cow Lakes Grazing Assoc	Lava	110 AUMs	50	35
	Boulder East		50	42
Tim Freeman	Lava	300 AUMs	50	35
	Boulder East		50	42
Dave Terry	Lava	58 AUMs	50	35
	Boulder West		50	42
Terry Warn	Big Ridge N	642 AUMs	60	47
	Big Ridge S		60	50
	Barlow		40	38
	Hooker Creek N		60	46
	Hooker Creek S		50	43

Permittee	Pasture	Suspended AUMs (Authorized under TNR)	Utilization Maximum	24 year Utilization Average
Mat Bowen	Cowgill	428 AUMs	50	38
	Little Sand N		60	56
	Little Sand E		60	50
	Little Sand S		60	41
	Downey Cyn		60	40

* 15 year Utilization Average

There are no federally listed fish or wildlife species present within this allotment. There is no requirement to consult with the US Fish and Wildlife Service under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act.

This grazing would occur at the same levels of TNR grazing that has been authorized on an annual basis for the past 24 years in pastures that are in excellent condition and have been maintained in this condition under similar grazing schemes over this period of time. Consequently, cumulative impacts should be negligible.

Additionally, the issuance of TNR would not interfere with existing livestock operations (i.e succeeding years use) and, most importantly, there are no known irreplaceable or irretrievable impacts.

The TNR use has been analyzed in the Southern Malheur MFP/EIS (1983) and no new resource issues exist.

Environmental Impacts (Alternative 1 “No Action”)

Resource impacts would be similar to the preferred alternative except livestock utilization levels would be the same or lower than the preferred alternative.

Post grazing season wildlife habitat conditions in upland and riparian areas would be better under the no action alternative than the proposed action. This would be true because livestock grazing impacts to wildlife cover, forage and nesting activity would occur over a smaller area and be less intense. However, in view of the planned utilization levels and the generally good quality wildlife habitat conditions present, the level of impact reduction would not be warranted from a wildlife habitat standpoint. Based on what was observed in the field, the character of grazing use being considered would substantially meet wildlife needs for both game and nongame species.

DESCRIPTION OF MITIGATION MEASURES AND RESIDUAL IMPACTS

The authorization of 1,713 AUMs of TNR would require periodic monitoring of average utilization and distribution to insure management objectives and utilization criteria (i.e. 60% crested wheatgrass and 50% native range (40% in Barlow pasture)) are not exceeded.

LITERATURE CITED

Aldrich, J.W. and A.J. Durall. 1955. Distribution of American Gallinaceous Game Birds. US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Thomas et. al. 1984. Wildlife in Managed Rangelands.

PERSONS/AGENCIES CONSULTED

Jon Sadowski - Wildlife Biologist

Diane Pritchard - Archeologist

Jean Findley - Botanist (T&E Species)

Tom Christensen - Outdoor Recreation Planner - P&E Coordinator

Joe-Riley Epps - Rangeland Management Specialist

Tom Miles - Supervisory Rangeland Management Specialist

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS

I have reviewed EA, OR-030-00-007 and determined that the proposed action with the mitigating measures will not have any significant impacts on the human environment and that an EIS is not required. I have determined that the proposed action is in conformance with the land use plan. My rationale for this FONSI is that for the past 24 years, these AUMs have been used on an annual basis with no resource problems identified. Average utilization levels are within standards. Riparian and wildlife values are being met by the grazing system and the utilization is consistent with maintaining sufficient understory for sagegrouse nesting and brood rearing needs. The Southern Malheur Grazing Management Program Environmental Impact Statement (1983-page 68) analyzed the use of these suspended AUMs along with the active preference for the allotment under the preferred alternative.

s/Jerry L. Taylor
Authorized Official

June 20, 2000
Date